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ABSTRACT

Advocating for young children is a primary focus of professionals in early childhood education (ECE). The complex nature of the EC profession requires comprehensive and multidimensional professional development opportunities. The purpose of this study was to identify current challenges faced by ECE professionals. The intent was to gather information that would provide direction in planning for professional development opportunities. Approximately 200 early childhood professionals participated in a conference which utilized a learning circle format. Outcomes from learning circle discussions were collected and analyzed. Participants identified everyday challenges that have an effect on their ability to provide optimal learning environments. Major challenges identified by the participants included lack of family involvement, social issues, lack of opportunities for professional development, dealing with children's behavioral problems, and curriculum and assessment. Based on the identified challenges, participants brainstormed strategies that would be effective in supporting children and families. Major strategies that they utilized pertained to implementing effective curriculum strategies, participating in professional development opportunities, advocacy work, and collaboration with parents. Strategies suggested by participants reflect the basic principles of understanding children's needs, respecting family diversity, and assuming leadership roles. Findings indicate urgent need for systematic support for professionals, recruitment of quality personnel, effective personnel preparation, and ongoing professional development. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/SM)

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Challenges In Early Childhood Environments: Voices From the Field

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Abstract

Serious challenges face the early childhood (EC) professional in meeting the needs of the whole child. Advocating for young children is a primary focus of professionals in early childhood education (ECE). The complex nature of the EC profession requires comprehensive and multidimensional professional development opportunities. The purpose of this study was to identify current challenges faced by ECE professionals. The intent was to gather information that would provide direction in planning for professional development opportunities. Approximately 200 early childhood professionals participated in a conference which utilized a learning circle format. Outcomes from learning circle discussions were collected and analyzed. Participants identified everyday challenges that have an effect on their ability to provide optimal learning environments. Major challenges identified by the participants included lack of family involvement, social issues, lack of opportunities for professional development, dealing with children's behavioral problems, and curriculum and assessment. Based on the identified challenges, participants brainstormed strategies that would be effective in supporting children and families. Major strategies that they utilized pertained to implementing effective curriculum strategies, participating in professional development opportunities, advocacy work, and collaboration with parents. Strategies suggested by participants reflect the basic principles of understanding children's needs, respecting family diversity, and assuming leadership roles. Findings indicate urgent need for systematic support for professionals, recruitment of quality personnel, effective personnel preparation, and ongoing professional development.

Challenges In Early Childhood Environments: Voices From the Field

When you get involved, you feel the sense of hope and accomplishment that comes from knowing you are working to make things better.
- Pauline R. Kezer

Serious challenges face the early childhood (EC) professional in meeting the needs of the whole child. Of utmost importance in the profession is the preparation of quality early childhood professionals (Hyson, 2001). Young children are faced with child abuse and neglect that continues as families deal with drug abuse, domestic violence, and poverty. As a result, advocating for young children is a primary focus of professionals in early childhood education (ECE). The complex nature of the EC profession requires comprehensive and multidimensional professional development opportunities. The purpose of this study was to identify current challenges faced by one group of EC professionals. The intent was to gather information that would provide direction in planning for ongoing professional development opportunities.

Perspective

The increasing expectations of early childhood professionals in today's society challenge the traditional notion of nurturing the young child. Hyson's (2001) review of major reports on early education, child development and learning, and professional development of teachers identifies common issues surrounding challenges facing the EC profession. Early childhood professionals are faced with a multitude of responsibilities that demand expertise to support the "whole child" in the development of social and emotional as well as in intellectual and academic growth. Furthermore, problems in American society, as listed below, contribute to the issues and demand a more solid knowledge base in order to meet the needs of the "whole child" (Children's Defense Fund, 2001):

3 in 5	preschoolers have their mothers in the labor force.
1 in 3	is born to unmarried parents.
1 in 5	was born poor
1 in 7	has no health insurance
1 in 8	is born to a teenage mother.
1 in 8	lives in a family receiving food stamps
1 in 13	was born with low birthweight.
1 in 24	lives with neither parent.
1 in 26	is born to a mother who received late or no prenatal care
1 in 60	sees their parents divorce in any year.
1 in 139	will die before their first birthday.

Beyond the every day state of affairs, our children have additional traumas that enter their lives through the media such as the events of September 11, 2001, as well as the happenings in daily television programming, news, and the movies they view.

Although the quality of life for children in Illinois has seen improvement in the past few years; births to teen mothers, children in foster care, high school dropouts, child abuse and neglect, and children and families on welfare have all decreased, there are still a multitude of needs unmet for Illinois' children. Significant numbers of children are without health insurance as are many of their parents, families are living in poverty and are in need of affordable housing, and significant racial disparity exists for infant mortality rates and in births to teen mothers. Additionally, Illinois ranks 30 in the 50 states for child death rate, high school dropouts, and children in poverty (Voices for Illinois Children, 2001).

Complicating the woes of society presented to the early childhood profession is the ever growing need for high quality teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. In reviewing seven report summaries on issues and expectations facing preparation of early childhood education professionals, Hyson (2001) identified challenges such as poorly qualified personnel, outdated and ineffective approaches, ineffective use of research, fragmentation of the

"whole child," lack of understanding of diversity, gaps in children's skills upon entering school, and underfinanced programs promoting disparity between socioeconomic levels.

Furthermore, EC professionals are experiencing changes in the roles they have as teachers in the classroom and in the relationships they have with families. The practice of educating young children with disabilities in natural settings requires that EC professionals demonstrate skills to effectively involve all children in their classrooms. Including children with disabilities has been one of the most important training needs for preschool teachers (Buscemi, Bennett, Thomas, & Deluca, 1995). In particular, with the increasing number of children identified as having attention deficit disorder and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), dealing with emotional and behavioral issues is one of the most critical challenges facing the EC professional on a daily basis (Buscemi, Bennett, Thomas, & Deluca, 1995). To successfully meet such challenges, inclusionary practice has required a shift in the professional role from that of being a parent educator providing training to a role of being more collaborative, supportive, and empowering. The expectation is that empowered parents will become more actively involved in their child's education (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Even so, practitioners cannot expect all parents will be involved at the same level. Seifert (1992) suggests that we need to individualize family involvement and find strategies to support parents even though they cannot physically involve themselves in various types of activities and meetings.

With the high expectations and demands of the profession, Early Childhood Education teachers and professionals have often been criticized for not providing high quality education to children. Teachers and professionals are constantly developing and implementing new strategies to meet these challenges and yet they seem to fall short (Bailey, Buysse, Edmondson, & Smith, 1992). This leads to feelings of personal inadequacy, self-doubt, and anxiety challenging one's

personal and professional self (Baptiste & Sheerer, 1997). Beyond the challenges of providing direct services as a means of meeting the needs and demands of today's children and families, are those resulting from the systemic changes in education as a whole. Programs are being shaped through the implementation of learning standards and professional teaching standards to support quality programming and personnel preparation. Responding to these expectations is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the leading organization providing guidelines in developmentally appropriate practices and ethical responsibilities necessary for working effectively with young children and families. Their recommendations center on three goals: 1.) improvements in professional practice and working conditions, 2.) improving public understanding and support for high quality programming, and 3.) building a strong, diverse, and inclusive organization (NAEYC, 1997). Achieving these goals requires that EC educators and practitioners develop and implement programs that address quality professional development, advocacy, and diversity awareness. In order to support EC professionals effectively, the challenges need to be studied from multiple perspectives. We must first examine whether EC professionals and teachers are provided with adequate administrative and collegial support within their work by focusing on a problem-solving approach in professional practice.

Early Childhood professionals are being held more accountable for young children's learning and development than ever before. With the No Child Left Behind legislation, the issues of accountability have become a primary focus in the ECE practice. Ongoing professional development is an essential element for successfully meeting the challenges of today. Professional development has shifted from the more traditional approach of dispensing and receiving knowledge at inservice workshops to more participatory active problem-solving and

planning models as is promoted by the Learning Circle model. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness and outcomes of an early childhood professional development conference utilizing the Learning Circle model.

Methods

Participants

As members of two central Illinois early childhood organizations, the researchers and members of a Conference Planning Committee organized and participated in an early childhood conference that utilized a Learning Circle format. Approximately 200 early childhood educators from a Midwestern city participated in the conference. The participants were primarily administrative personnel and teachers from private child care centers, at risk programs residing in public school settings, Early Head Start programs, Even Start programs, and social service personnel from early intervention agencies.

Learning Circles

The Learning Circle concept focuses on bringing information "full circle" by identifying key points (challenges and strategies) to assist professionals in developing action plans. Wade and Hammick (1999) provide an overview of the Learning Circle model, sometimes referred to as Action Learning Circles, that has been successfully implemented in the health care and social service professions. The Learning Circle model has also been utilized as a framework for individuals to examine and change practice within the educational setting (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, & Gagnon, 1998).

The focus of learning circles is on the experiential aspect of learning. For professionals in the field continuing their educational development, learning circles provide for a continual process of learning that starts with individual experiences and extends those experiences by

including reflection and then the development of action plans (Wade & Hammick, 1999). It serves as a strong model for problem-solving within professional practice. McGill & Beaty (1993, in Wade & Hammick,1999) identify the intent of learning circles as a means to, "help people to take an active stance towards life and helps overcome the tendency to be passive towards the pressures of life and work" (p. 164). Collay et al. (1998) define learning circles as, "small communities of learners among teachers and others who come together intentionally for the purpose of supporting each other in the process of learning" (p. 2). Such a model allows professionals opportunity to actively participate in their learning and problem-solving. They become more energized to fully participate in the mission of their programs.

Conference attendees were divided into groups of 10 at the time of registration. The facilitators of each learning circle solicited participant responses to identify challenges they experience while working with young children and families. Successful strategies were brainstormed and then shared for the purpose of creating a composite list and developing action plans. Conference participants were broken into groups of approximately 10 for the learning circle format. During learning circles, conference participants responded to specific questions pertaining to the keynote presentation. Additionally, facilitators had participants identify the challenges they experience and the strategies they utilize in the EC profession. These responses were the data analyzed for this study. Eighteen learning circles participated in the discussion of challenges in the ECE settings and six groups in identifying effective strategies that participants used.

Data Analysis

Researchers collected and analyzed data from the learning circles using a qualitative coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were reviewed independently and were

categorized into units of meaning. These units were quantified according to the identified categories. Inter-coder reliability was computed on 100% of the data, and an average reliability of 93% was obtained. Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological model was used as a framework to further analyze data related to challenges of providing high quality ECE services. This framework was based upon the accountability of multiple levels of challenges.

Findings

Challenges in ECE Programs

Participants identified everyday challenges that have an effect on their ability to provide optimal learning environments. Confirming Hyson's (2001) findings and those reported by the Children's Defense fund (2001), the major challenges identified by the participants included lack of family involvement, social issues (i.e., poverty, neglect, abuse), lack of opportunities for professional development, dealing with children's behavioral problems, and curriculum and assessment. Professionals' perceptions on challenges in their practice indicate that while they acknowledge the importance of parent-professional collaboration, they are faced with barriers from multiple social systems including home, schools, community, state, and government. Meeting these challenges requires systematic support from multiple social systems.

Bronfenbrenner's (1995) social system theory (see Figure 1) was used as a framework to interpret challenges identified by learning circle participants. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's micro-level, some participants (n=65) perceived families as barriers.

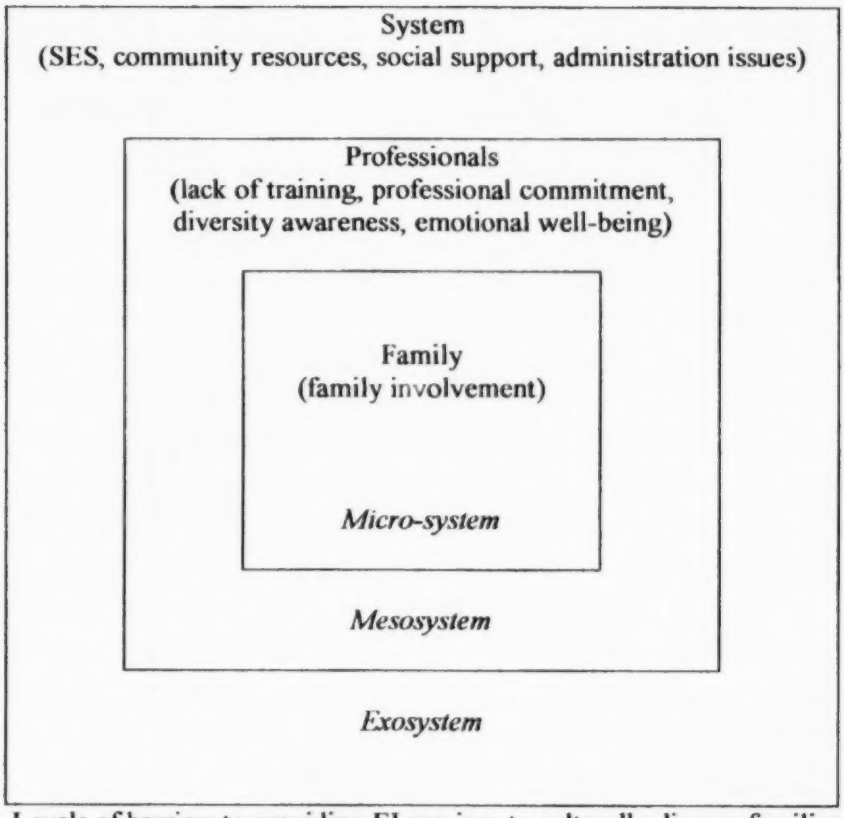

Figure 1. Levels of barriers to providing EI services to culturally diverse families: Modified from Bronfenbrenner's (1995) levels of ecological analysis.

The challenges identified by the participants were grouped into three major categories of system, professional, and family based on the accountability of each challenge (see Table 1). Approximately 32 % of the participants felt that their ability to provide high quality ECE services was hindered by families' lack of participation, lack of concern with their child's education, and lack of appropriate parenting skills. It should be noted that challenges grouped in one category are not mutually exclusive. For example, the challenge of parental non-participation can also be related to system and professional challenge. This perception of parental non-participation may be largely due to professionals' attitude and training background, which involves professionals teaching parents rather than collaborating with them and empowering

them. For example, what was seen as lack of parental involvement could be seen as professionals' lack of creating welcoming environments for families.

Insert Table 1 here

Professional barriers, the second level, reflect respondents' own level of knowledge and skills. Forty percent of professionals noted challenges caused by their own lack of awareness or personal adequacy to meet the expectations of the profession. Professionals indicated that they lack effective communication strategies that are crucial for successful collaboration with families. Some of the participants were concerned with the negative atmosphere caused by individuals who lack commitment and pride in their profession within their own programs. In addition, they expressed strong need for training in the areas of diversity awareness, understanding and managing children's behavior, collaboration strategies, and their own well-being. A number of comments were related to the challenges and differing perspectives when working with parents with diverse ethnic and linguistic background. These differences can be attributed to both systems and professionals; some professionals stated that barriers occurred because they lacked cultural awareness and knowledge about families' cultures. However, some professionals provided successful services by accepting cultural differences and taking steps to minimize their impact on service delivery.

Challenges related to the social system above professional level, represented by the exo-system level, accounted for approximately 32% of all challenges. Organizational structures such as ECE programs and state regulations are included within this level. The barriers also included social issues such as lack of community resources, lack of general public's respect toward the

ECE profession, poverty in general, and administrative support from programs. Even when professionals were willing to provide services, and families were willing to participate, providing quality early childhood services to diverse families was hindered due to the above mentioned social system barriers.

Furthermore, researchers and practitioners need to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies, especially those which professionals support, but rarely implement. In doing so, professionals from diverse locations and multiple disciplines need to be involved in validating the effectiveness of these strategies. They also need to carefully examine whether existing strategies are effective with the families they serve when determining the extent and success of implementation.

Successful Strategies for Meeting Challenges

After participants identified challenges in their practice, they then had opportunity to share their experiences of using strategies to meet those challenges (see Table 2). Comments related to strategies that participants used were grouped into four categories: (a) use of effective curriculum strategies; (b) professional development & collaboration; (c) family-professional partnership; and (d) advocacy. Approximately 40% of professionals' comments pertained to the use of effective instructional and guidance strategies such as careful observation of children's learning styles and behaviors, use of conflict resolution methods, and facilitation of play for children's learning and emotional development.

Insert Table 2 here

Twenty five percent of participants' comments were related to the effectiveness of professional training in which they participated. Effective trainings identified included

diversity/sensitivity training from which they increased their cultural competence in working with young children and their families of diverse cultural backgrounds. They also found trainings on communication strategies, such as asking questions and providing careful explanations to be effective. In particular, asking questions in diverse ways in order to initiate conversations with families or to obtain families' cultural information were often utilized and proved to be effective. Similarly, several respondents stated that they relied heavily on families' input in learning more about the child's learning style and temperament.

Nineteen percent of the identified strategies were related to family-professional collaboration. Themes in this category include supporting families, collaborating with families, supporting families in identifying and utilizing resources. It should be noted that a number of participants indicated the importance of establishing positive relationships with families. Other strategies included creating a variety of ways to involve families in their child's education, and empowering families instead of trying to teach families what to do about their child.

Some of the identified strategies (17%) were related to the professionals' role as an advocate and how to raise awareness relative to the importance of early childhood education. Related themes included assuming leadership, networking, taking action, and lobbying. A number of participants indicated that they successfully lobbied for additional funding by educating lobbyist and community leaders, which increased awareness and understanding of the importance of early childhood education.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to identify current challenges faced by one group of EC professionals in a Midwestern metropolitan city. The intent was to gather information that would provide direction in planning for ongoing professional development opportunities. The findings

of this study are consistent with existing literature in terms of identified challenges (Hyson, 2000). Findings also support existing suggestions for providing effective strategies (see NAEYC Guidelines, 1997). The literature already includes numerous challenges and suggestions, which professionals generally perceive as important. However, the existing literature does not address the challenges professionals might face in implementing those suggestions. For example, this study found an apparent lack of support, not only for families, but also for professionals to provide effective services to families.

In addition, this study revealed professionals' heterogeneous attitudes towards their profession. For some participants, family involvement was not an issue at all, since it is one of the main foci of their program; for many, it interfered with their practice mainly due to lack of awareness in respecting family involvement. The most important contributions of this study pertain to the challenges professionals face and their suggestions for overcoming them. This study also has major implications for personnel preparation and the development of a support system for professionals. First, researchers need to evaluate strategies which are supported by professionals as ideal. They also need to examine difficulties EC professionals faced as they try to meet numerous challenges. Given that the major challenges concerned professional inadequacies, the remaining task for the early childhood education system is to develop a pre- and in-service personnel development plan that would facilitate competencies and attitudinal changes. Second, as indicated by the participants, professional support in implementing ideal suggestions should be identified and communicated to the administrators, including policy makers, and ECE national organization leaders. Third, specific strategies should be identified for professionals to utilize in providing services. Lastly, considering the difficulty of affecting attitudinal changes among professionals, this study may also have implications for recruitment.

Recruiting professionals who are committed toward providing high quality services regardless of the challenges of ECE programs (e.g., multiple roles and responsibilities they need to assume, low salary, lack of administrative support) is critical. In addition, regardless of training, professionals who are open-minded may more easily implement suggestions than professionals who are not.

Limitations/Future Research

Several limitations need to be acknowledged in the current study. First, as professionals were recruited from one mid-western metropolitan area, they may not be representative of ECE professionals nationwide. Second, the study depended on participants' perceptions on challenges and strategies. It is possible that respondents were influenced by the facilitator or other participants who were more vocal than they were. Third, this study depended on perceptions from professionals only; different issues might have been identified if families who these professionals served had participated in the study. Considering the nature and scope of this study, an additional study involving families is desirable.

Replications of the current study are needed to validate existing suggestions and identify additional ones. A study that utilizes quantitative methodology (e.g., survey) and qualitative methodology (e.g., interview) and involves both professionals and families will afford researchers a better understanding of issues which were identified by professionals. Also, a pre- and post-test type of longitudinal intervention study will enable researchers to examine the effectiveness of training on the quality of ECE programs. Lastly, case studies could be used to evaluate numerous training projects related to cultural diversity; results of multiple case studies can then be analyzed to determine the efficacy of overall training projects. The efficacy study should combine data from multiple sources and individuals.

Conclusion

The challenges and suggestions for providing effective ECE practices in the existing literature were generally consistent with the findings from the current study. While the literature generally recommended that professionals implement numerous strategies related to teaching, guidance, and family involvement, few studies have examined multiple aspects of challenges professionals faced. In addition, specific difficulties that professionals may face, and how and where they might get support were seldom addressed. Moreover, the effectiveness of recommendations for learning and behavior has not been tested empirically, and voices of ECE professionals have rarely been heard. Thus, while professionals may be described as not being competent, not much attention has been paid to the numerous difficulties they faced. In other words, whether professionals could have provided better services with adequate support has rarely been addressed. Likewise, since the development of the family-centered approach, professionals have been expected to change from a child-focused, therapeutic perspective to a family-focused one. As Bailey and his colleagues (1992) stated, professionals have generally supported new approaches or best practices, yet many considered the family-centered approach formidable. As we hear professionals' stories of successes and challenges in providing high quality ECE programs, everyone from policy makers to families should focus on identifying and developing new strategies.

As previously discussed, fundamental barriers to providing services to young children and their families may stem from lack of support from the larger social system that involves the community, state, and federal government. Therefore, the content and method of training should go beyond a mere collection of information on a topic to an action oriented approach. Attitudinal

changes related to respecting families and diversity need to be nurtured through well-planned training at both pre- and in-service levels. Preferably, respecting diversity should begin at the earliest level of children's education. In this way, future ECE programs may be able to recruit more professionals with increased diversity awareness. As findings of this study indicate, barriers need to be addressed at multiple layers of the social system; EC professionals alone are not the only ones responsible for providing quality programs.

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Table 1

Challenges in ECE Programs

Categories (N=230 codes)	Themes	Sample Statements
System (n=73/32%)	Socio-economic status, relocation, community resources, safety, social support, administration issues,	• Lack of community resources • Lack of respect toward ECE teachers and professionals • Poverty in general
Professional (n=92/40%)	Lack of training, professional commitment, knowledge in behavior management, curriculum & assessment, diversity awareness, emotional well-being	• Lack of effective communication strategies • Lack of awareness and respect for families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds • Lack of professional commitment and interest • Lack of knowledge and skills in behavior management/curriculum and assessment
Family (n= 65/28%)	Family involvement, family education	• Lack of family involvement and collaboration • Inappropriate parenting skills

Table 2

Strategies to Providing High Quality ECE Services for Families

Categories (N=42 codes)	Themes	Sample Statements
Use of Effective Curriculum Strategies (n=17/40%)	Use of instructional strategies including teaching, behavior guidance, and observation	• Careful observation and listening worked • Used conflict resolution strategies • Facilitated play for children to express their emotion
Professional Development/ Collaboration (n=10/24%)	Participate in training, examining one's own attitudes	• Participate in diversity/sensitivity training • Manage good mental health • Seek support from the mentor • Learning about families
Family Professional Collaboration (n=8/19%)	Supporting families, collaborating with families, resource identification & utilization	• Establish positive relationship with families/build rapport • Create many ways to involve families • Empower families instead of trying to teach
Advocacy (n=7/17%)	Leadership, networking, taking actions, lobbying	• Lobbying legislation for more funding • Educate lobbyist and community leaders • Become more vocal and assume leadership roles

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